

## Lights Out by alteanheart

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**Summary:**

Nancy, Steve and Jonathan try to navigate starting college, their complicated feelings for one another, and whether a murderous interdimensional being is back in town.

# 1. Hold the line, love isn't always on time

## Author's Note:

- For [Taeyn](#).

“It did it again. You weren’t imagining it, I saw it too.”

Jonathan reached his hand across the mattress, fingers unfurled as if to brush against her sweater. He stopped well before, eyes darting away as they both realized. Nancy went back to staring at her desk light, then shrugged and shook her head, the corners of her mouth twitching downward.

“I wasn’t thinking I was imagining anything- just that I need a new study lamp.”

The words sounded a shade too bright, her tone rising at the edges as she took a swing at carefree.

“Okay,” Jonathan said after a moment, took a breath, then gave a single nod. “Okay.”

They sat without speaking for what felt like a long time, listening to the rest of the college humming and slamming doors, their neighbors somewhere between returning from lectures and getting ready for whatever party would kick-off the session. Indiana State was only a forty minute drive from Hawkins, but after only a week as a freshman, Nancy couldn’t have felt further from home.

“You could’ve gone somewhere else, you know,” Jonathan said quietly, staring unblinking at the dorm room ceiling. “Stanford or Harvard or something. I know you made the grade.”

He didn’t sound accusing, just preoccupied somehow, which was par for the course for Jonathan Byers. Nancy tipped her head to face him.

“Jonathan, if you’re for one second suggesting I only came here because you and *Steve* were coming here-”

“No, no, I’m not,” Jonathan said hurriedly, his somber expression

interrupted by a trace of unease. "I mean, you want to be able to visit Michael and Holly and stuff, I get that."

"Right," Nancy tried, annoyed at the slightly off-key sound to her voice. That *was* the reason, after all. She wasn't one of those girls who couldn't stomach being away from her high-school boyfriend, and Steve wasn't one of those guys who would dump her just because they had to wait for the holidays. And Jonathan wasn't one of those friends that just forgot you and disappeared. Heck, she'd probably get more conversation out of him in a letter than in one of their all-night chats.

"I was just going to say, I got offered NYU. I turned it down too."

Nancy blinked. Jonathan had spoken so matter-of-factly that she almost couldn't believe he had waited this long to mention it. She would've leapt bolt upright if it weren't for knowing it would set him on edge.

"But that was what you *wanted*," she whispered, tugging at her ballet-slipper necklace as the realization set in. "I thought the whole point of you applying for scholarships was to—"

"-get an offer." Jonathan finished, but he sounded sad. "And I did. I just accepted the one here instead. I don't want to be a day's drive from Will and Mom, and it wasn't until I saw the NYU letter that I knew that for sure."

Nancy bit her lip, a tiny crease forming at the bridge of her nose. It was totally and completely reasonable, but somehow, she still wanted to drag him out to the nearest bus depot and stuff him on a Greyhound to New York.

"You're doing the frowny thing," Jonathan suggested, his mouth venturing toward a smile at one side.

"You waited until I couldn't change your mind," Nancy measured.

"I wouldn't have changed it," Jonathan said fixedly, though he always seemed to stiffen his jaw when things weren't so clear cut. "But besides. I'm glad we're both going through together now. I

wanted to tell you that.”

“We need to work on your build-up to a compliment,” Nancy breathed, a sigh lifting her shoulders.

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“That too.”

They relaxed back into silence, Nancy letting her gaze wander over what home comforts she had unpacked so far. The biggest item was the patchwork bedspread they were currently sprawled over, all faded pastels, a couple of ink and coffee stains, and a lifetime of late night phone calls spent tucked into its folds. The one that mattered most was the photo collage- a corkboard almost as wide as her arm, pinned with everyone who had been her whole world. Barb smiled back at her from one of the polaroids, and Nancy felt the familiar prickle behind her eyes. She was just about to start telling herself *not today*, when a fist thumped against her door, as enthusiastic as it was determined.

“Nance! Nance, you in there? Check this out-”

Steve swung into the dorm, hair ruffled out of place from the jog over, a tangle of white bedsheets in his arms. If he was surprised to see Jonathan, he quickly recovered it, grinning at Nancy’s raised eyebrows.

“Toga party. Tonight. In the quad. In celebration of our commencement at this grand institution.” Steve spread an arm towards the window, nothing short of chuffed with himself. “Jonathan, man, you in?”

“I’ve still got stuff to unpack,” Jonathan replied diplomatically.

“That attitude’s not gonna fly with members of the Recreation Association,” Steve threw a wink towards Nancy, who had made the mistake of putting her name down for far too many college societies on orientation day.

“Actually, I’m thinking I might just stay back and get settled here too,” Nancy hesitated. Just *finding* all her first week lectures had been

exhausting enough, not to mention the amount of readings her tutors had set. And science wasn't the sort of degree where you could wing it- you either knew the formulas, or you didn't.

"Oh yeah, you sure?" Steve leaned back against her door frame, slightly deflated. His team spirit hadn't exactly been lacking since they'd stepped foot on the grounds, and for the first time, Nancy wondered if her homesickness might not have been flying as low under the radar as she thought.

"Actually... I don't know, maybe we should all check it out," she backtracked, glancing toward Jonathan before he could make a surreptitious exit. Her heart squeezed a little when she saw Steve rearrange his stance, his posture getting that strange, slouchy confidence which belied him trying to play it cool. He was over the moon.

"Sweet, I'll go get more bedsheets."

"I've got my own," Jonathan said pointedly, shooting Nancy a *you-owe me* look before heading for his bedroom down the hall. Nancy tried her best sheepish smile, but in truth, there was something about giving this a try that she was starting to like. And it hadn't been just the three of them in a while.

Steve stepped closer once Jonathan was out of sight, his arms loose at his sides in case she wanted a hug. There had always been something reassuringly protective about Steve, and she found herself folding into his chest without needing to think about it.

"You need any help with the room?" he asked gently, the question half-muffled in her hair. There were still a couple of boxes in the corner, but all the important stuff was sorted.

"I'll manage." Nancy smiled, eyes closing as she let her ear rest against Steve's jacket. There was a zippy, smoky scent about him, cologne mixed with cigarettes and clean wool. "Help me figure out how a toga's supposed to be worn instead."

"Damn, I was banking on asking you." Steve chuckled, then skipped a thumb wryly over Nancy's shirt collar. "Guess there's always time for

a dress rehearsal.”

Nancy snorted, then laughed as Steve brimmed to a guilty smirk- *hey, you can't blame a guy for trying right?*

“Jonathan will be back any second.” Nancy rolled her eyes, fond. She half-expected Steve to leap in with a joke about speed not exactly being his problem, but when she looked back, she saw he was staring at the photo of Barbara instead. For a moment, he looked much older, but when he spoke he sounded lost.

“You were both going to take science majors here,” he murmured. “You told me the night we got drunk at the arcade.”

Nancy bit her lip again at the memory. She'd been less drunk than she pretended.

“Yeah.”

Steve turned to her, then reached for her hand. She wasn't sure how long they stood together like that, but the next thing she knew Jonathan was ducking in from the corridor, a cream-colored bedsheet neatly folded under his arm.

“We're still doing this then?” he offered, unreadable.

Steve peered into Nancy's face, searching for what she knew she'd already found. They all had.

“We're doing this,” she said quietly. It felt good.

“Hell yeah,” Steve answered, a slow smile pulling them back.

Beside Barb's photograph, the desk lamp gave one tiny, silent flicker.

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## 2. Nancy and Steve, sitting in a tree

### Summary for the Chapter:

*Steve squeezed her shoulder, slugged the rest of his can, then stepped back and gave her the kind of grin that always preceded something terribly forward, or terribly ridiculous.*

*“Nancy Wheeler, may I have this dance?”*

*Nancy almost spluttered mid-sip of her own. It seemed this time, it would be both.*

“This makes the parties in Hawkins look like-”

“-graveyard vigils,” Steve finished, giving the kind of squint that suggested a serious doubt Jonathan had ever been to any parties at all.

Surprising herself, Nancy found herself glad of all the noise. It was the forgettable kind of chaos you could get lost in, walk round every corner without worrying what you were going to see.

“At least the music is decent,” Jonathan mumbled, gravitating toward the makeshift stage. The student band was playing an acoustic version of Rick Springfield’s *Jessie’s Girl*, which sounded oddly haunting without the peppy guitar riffs.

“The music is wonderful...” Nancy returned, gazing dreamily over the quadrangle in a way that made Steve laugh and mime taking the beer out of her hand.

“Back in a sec,” Jonathan said slowly, eyes narrowing as he peered into the crowd. For a second, Nancy thought she saw a familiar face, but by the time she stood on tiptoe there was nothing. Glancing back around, she realized Jonathan had wasted no time in giving them the slip.

Steve put his hand on Nancy’s shoulder.

“Think he’s having a good time?”

Nancy considered it, leaning her cheek to rest on Steve’s knuckles. It was hard to tell with Jonathan.

“He’s been kind of... in his own head,” she allowed, sifting through their first week of college for something she might have missed. “But then, you know...”

Steve twitched the corner of his mouth, happy to put the thought into words.

“But Jonathan?”

Nancy found herself smiling too.

“That pretty much covers it.”

Steve squeezed her shoulder, slugged the rest of his can, then stepped back and gave her the kind of grin that always preceded something terribly forward, or terribly ridiculous.

“Nancy Wheeler, may I have this dance?”

Nancy almost spluttered mid-sip of her own. It seemed this time, it would be both.

“Since when do we-”

“-do dumb and romantic stuff that no one’s ever going to notice or remember anyway?” Steve interjected, having clearly seen that one coming miles away.

Nancy could feel herself blushing, though he was right, it was dark enough outside, half the campus was collapsed into one another in some sort of messy embrace, and more than that...

She actually wanted to.

“*Maybe*,” she swallowed, trying to stop the warmth from creeping any higher in her cheeks. Their high school prom had been cancelled after everything that happened, and she would never have felt right



getting ready without Barb anyway. Somewhere between then and now, the idea of dancing with Steve had started to seem okay again.

“Alright then,” Steve said smoothly, then straightened and held out his hand, palm up. For a second, he looked almost exactly how he did when they’d first spoken by the lockers that time- tall and full of nervous bravado, her shy and piecing together her answers, giddy as she made him smile.

Her fingers slipped into his.

“Now I’m definitely wishing I didn’t have that beer,” she grinned, narrowly avoiding stepping on his foot as he gently pulled her close.

“Oh no, believe me, it’s cute.” Steve winked, guiding her in a soft arc. He was a surprisingly graceful lead, and Nancy found herself wondering why on earth she’d assumed that he wouldn’t be.

“You know, my parents had their first dance on a college lawn too,” Nancy said after a while, then choked on a giggle as Steve grimaced, perhaps not exactly expecting to be compared to Ted Wheeler for his efforts.

“Well, your father... uh. Great minds,” Steve recovered, running a hand through his hair. “At least you didn’t say he stopped the jukebox to propose!”

Nancy gave him a guilty grin, recalling the much-recounted end of her mom’s favorite story.

“Oh boy.” Steve laughed, then bobbed an affectionate kiss to the top of her brow. Strangely, Nancy considered whether he didn’t in fact sound more wishful than freaked-out. The thought was still processing when a loud crackle echoed from the speakers, followed by a bang and a whining, popping noise. The lights around the stage flared, then fizzled to black.

“Okay, that definitely wasn’t part of my first-dance plan,” Steve joked, but Nancy had already stopped still.

“Where’s Jonathan?”

While everyone around her had voiced nothing more than a disappointed groan, Nancy could feel a cold, whirring energy stirring beneath her chest, a tightness in her throat that told her nothing was okay.

“He was... checking out the band, remember? It’s just a blackout, they happen all the-”

Nancy was already weaving through the crowd, fingers unknotting her bedsheet garb as she walked. She had worn a loose pair of slacks and a camisole underneath the toga, there was no way she was going to be caught out if something went wrong. And now, just as she’d dreaded, it was happening again. Unraveling the last of the material from her waist, she let it flutter to the grass behind her as she broke into a run. There were no screams or shouts, just a hum of casual chatter, the occasional *‘hey- watch it!’* as she shoved past. Her eyes were adjusting to the moonlight and she was about to call Jonathan’s name, when he spotted her first.

“Nancy!”

Jonathan was standing next to a large amplifier, something clutched in his fists.

“Jonathan! What happened! What...”

Nancy realized she was breathing hard, and her ribs suddenly ached as she reached for his elbow. She was looking around- behind him, behind her, up toward the sky...

Nothing.

“It’s just the circuit,” Jonathan started, but she could see he was shaken too. “It was me. My fault. I must’ve tripped on this -” he glanced at the cord in his hands, worry turning to embarrassment. “I was trying to see-”

“-how much more of a fucking loser you could be?”

Nancy and Jonathan turned at the unexpected drawl, their faces falling in mutual dismay as Tommy H stepped out of the shadows.

“-cause it seems to me, pal, that you’re starting a trend here. Just can’t keep your paws where they don’t belong.”

“Oh please, take a hike,” Nancy scowled, her tone far more confident than she actually felt. To Jonathan, she rolled her eyes. “I take it back. Stanford or Harvard sounds better by the minute.”

Jonathan huffed a vague laugh, but his eyes looked tense and wild.

“Get lost, Tommy,” he muttered. “You have no idea.”

“Yeah? I’m not so sure.” Tommy licked his lips, triumphant, and Nancy turned to see what he was sneering at. Behind her, Steve had finally caught up.

“What’s doing, man?” Steve asked coolly, his stare swinging from Nancy to his former friend. Steve had never exactly been forthcoming with her about why the two of them stopped hanging out, but Nancy figured it had something to do with Tommy being a complete asshole, whereas Steve only did a good impression of one.

“What *I’m* doing is minding my own business, what this dude’s doing is snooping around backstage,” Tommy snapped, jerking his head toward Jonathan. Nancy crossed her arms- *backstage* was hardly the word she’d use to describe the two feet of grass behind a line of milk crates. “Surprised we didn’t find him under the floorboards with his camera or something.”

“Why do you care?” Steve returned, hands shoved in his pockets. Tommy, meanwhile, had clenched both fists by his sides. If they hadn’t yet come to blows, Nancy suspected they weren’t far from it. “It’s ancient history.”

“You reckon?” Tommy scoffed. Somewhere to Nancy’s right, she heard the drone of a generator, and a moment later the lights and sound system blinked back to life.

“We’ll see you round, Tommy.” Steve shrugged, taking a step backwards that suggested Jonathan and Nancy should follow.

“Easy for you to say!” Tommy called after, miffed at not having gotten the last word. “You didn’t see how he looked when she ran to

*rescue him!"*

Jonathan kept his eyes firmly on his feet as the three of them made their way out of the quadrangle. Nancy tried to shoot him a reassuring smile- Jonathan had an uncanny talent for acting like he was guilty of something when he most definitely wasn't.

Her expression faltered when she saw what Jonathan was holding. Gripped tightly in both fists was the loose wire, the one he claimed to have tripped over. When Nancy peered closer, she could see the socket plug had been blackened to a crisp.

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### 3. We all scream for ice cream

#### Summary for the Chapter:

*"I know it sounds like a blown fuse," Jonathan shook his head, frustrated. "But think about it, okay. It could be a blown fuse. Or it could be something else. After everything that happened, are we really just going to play wait and see?"*

*Nancy raised her eyebrows to Steve. He had a point. Steve sucked a deep breath, then leaned his head back against Nancy's poster of The Who.*

*"I like wait and see. Wait and See's a fun game, compared to Here I Am Come And Kill Me."*

#### Notes for the Chapter:

tysm for reading this lil thing so far! : '>

"Let's take it from the top, yeah?"

Steve was perched on the edge of Nancy's desk, gesturing with his cup of half-melted rocky road. They had passed a Mr. Whippy on the way back, and collectively theorized that conversations about dark alternate dimensions were more palatable with caramel fudge and chopped nuts.

"There's nothing more to say, just *that*-" Jonathan gestured to the wire and socket plug, now carefully folded and exhibited in the middle of Nancy's bedroom floor, "and the fact that just before I found it, the stage lights were blinking like crazy. You must've seen, right?"

Steve gave a noncommittal shrug. Nancy hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary before the blackout either.

"Maybe the blinking was supposed to happen though?" Nancy suggested, gently toying with the ring on her right forefinger. "I mean, it was a live performance, aren't there supposed to be

technical effects and stuff?”

Jonathan stirred his dessert, his face taut with concentration.

“No. Not like this.”

The statement left a heavy silence, which Steve tried to fill with clearing his throat.

“So, the lights flash, you check it out and *boom*, one of the wires got fried.”

“I know it sounds like a blown fuse,” Jonathan shook his head, frustrated. “But think about it, okay. It *could* be a blown fuse. Or it could be something else. After everything that happened, are we really just going to play wait and see?”

Nancy raised her eyebrows to Steve. He had a point. Steve sucked a deep breath, then leaned his head back against Nancy’s poster of The Who.

“I like wait and see. Wait and See’s a fun game, compared to Here I Am Come And Kill Me.”

Jonathan exhaled a laugh, looking slightly less haunted for a second.

“We know how to *win* at the second one though.”

Steve rubbed his eye with a knuckle, his quaffed hair falling out of place.

“Dude, I’ve really got to introduce you to Twister.”

Nancy had tucked her knees to her chest, a small grin starting at the corner of her lips as she glanced from one to the other. Jonathan’s mileage was so often set to stoic, it still took her by surprise when he debated with Steve. Strangely, she found she quite liked it.

“So... we ask around,” she suggested, passing Steve her strawberry-vanilla swirl to finish. “See if anyone’s seen anything. If there’s another one of those... *things*... I mean, the last one was elusive, but it wasn’t exactly invisible.”

Steve rolled his eyes in exasperation, kicking his boots up onto the desk. “Uh, yeah, cause, you know, that’s not weird at all. Like, *‘Hey, man, I know I don’t know you, but... how was your first week of college? Any lighting issues? Friends gone AWOL? Faceless interdimensional beings reaching through the ceiling? No? Still want to be lab partners though?’*”

Nancy had been glaring at him more and more pointedly throughout the impression, and had just opened her mouth to tell him to quit it, when Jonathan spoke up.

“He’s right. It’s weird.”

He said it so flatly that Nancy felt a pang of unexpected guilt. There had been a time when she’d thought of Jonathan as exactly that-weird- and somehow, she wished it hadn’t taken a near-death experience to realize that she couldn’t have been more wrong. As if reading her thoughts, Jonathan got to his feet, deposited his barely touched ice cream in the trash can and brushed off his jeans.

“Don’t mention anything to anyone, okay? Seriously. I’m just being paranoid. The grief counselor said something like this might happen.”

Steve offered a consoling grimace- the mention of talking to a counselor clearly gave him the heebie-jeebies worse than the events that preceded it. All three of them had been roped into compulsory school therapy sessions in the weeks after Will’s return, and subsequently released from them when they developed a rapid onset allergy to talking about their problems. How could they? There was no knowing who was working for who.

“You have every reason to be cautious,” Nancy answered softly, but Jonathan was already making for the door, hands thrust tightly beneath his armpits.

“Catch you guys tomorrow.”

He didn’t turn around.

“See you, man,” Steve called, but his usual nonchalance sounded strained.

Nancy stared at her bedroom door, listened to Jonathan’s footsteps

fading down the hall, then grabbed a denim jacket and quickly flung it over the burnt-out socket plug.

“I might call it a night,” she started, her expression turning to one of suspicion when a slow grin tugged at the side of Steve’s mouth. “What?”

“Well, you know,” he said evenly, slouching down from her desk and lobbing his empty dessert cups into the bin. “With a potential bloodthirsty alien on the radar and all, wouldn’t want you to have to sleep alone.”

“Steve.”

Nancy had her hands on her hips, but the crease at the edge of Steve’s eyes was already doing that flippy-floppy thing with her stomach, and she couldn’t hold back the beginning of a smile.

“I’ll just chill on the rug. Or under the desk or something. You never know where these monsters are gonna show up.”

The idea of putting his second offer to the test was enough to pull the smile into something more tangible. With no effort to swap her camisole and slacks for pajamas, she let herself fall loosely across her mattress, then playfully threw him one of the pillows.

“The rug’s a polyester-wool blend. It can get kind of itchy.”

Steve took the advice in his stride, punching the pillow into a reasonable shape before collapsing onto the floor with a dramatic *oomph* sound.

“There’s also a draft that comes in under the bedroom door,” Nancy added seriously, while Steve made a show of rearranging himself even closer to the so-called problem.

“And I think we might have rats.”

At that Steve decided to look vaguely curious, rolling over and peering under Nancy’s mattress. All of a sudden, his mouth tightened, eyes momentarily widening before glancing up at Nancy.



“Uh, Nance...”

Not fooled for a second, Nancy poked her tongue out at him, shuffling a fraction nearer to pretend to be spooked. She saw Steve’s hand shiver as he tried to point, breath catching in his throat.

“Um, no, really, Nance...”

Nancy only just had time to catch the stricken flash in her boyfriend’s eyes, when two very quick things happened at once. The first was the peculiarly eerie sound of her mattress creaking as she leaned over to see what Steve was staring at. And the second was Steve suddenly reaching for her waist, pulling her down onto the floor on top of him, and bursting into laughter when she let out a high-pitched squeal.

“Steve Harrington, you are *dead!*” Nancy shrieked, unable to stop the giggles despite the fact her heart was racing a mile a minute.

“My bad, must’ve been a shadow after all.” Steve grinned, raising both arms as Nancy whacked him none too gently with the spare pillow.

“You are *awful!*” she exclaimed, wriggling out of his grip when he tried to steal the pillow.

“I know, I know, I’m the worst.” Steve let go, both palms up in surrender. Straddling his torso, Nancy relaxed her guard for only a second, before Steve managed to flip them over so that she was pinned beneath him instead. He offered a rueful wink. “Again. So bad.”

Looking up at him, Nancy realized her heart was still pounding in her chest, though this time for a very different reason. Steve’s face was half-obscured by his hair, smile lopsided and eyes all watery from the dust on the rug. His t-shirt had pulled taut against his chest in the struggle, arms flexed as he gently held onto her wrists. His lips parted, as if to make another goofy comment, but Nancy got there first.

“Shut up,” she said softly, shuffling onto her elbows and leaning up to his jaw.

“I can do that,” Steve whispered.

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**Author's Note:**

Thank you so much for reading! c: Kudos and comments are adored and appreciated, as is general flailing about anything Stranger Things! Always! <3